

These Inconvenient Fireworks by Luddleston

Category: Arcane: League of Legends (Cartoon 2021)

Genre: Alternate Universe - College/University, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Background Jayce/Mel, Background Viktor/Jayne, Caitlyn and Vi are Gay Disasters, Cupcakes, Drama & Romance, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, Everyone Is Alive, F/F, Fake/Pretend Relationship, First Kiss, Fluff and Humor, Getting Together, Jinx is Powder, Mutual Pining, Sharing a Bed, Tutoring, hijinks and shenanigans galore

Language: English

Characters: Caitlyn (League of Legends), Heimerdinger (League of Legends), Jayce (League of Legends), Jinx (League of Legends), Mel Medarda, Sevika (Arcane: League of Legends), Silco (Arcane: League of Legends), Sky (Arcane: League of Legends), Vander (League of Legends), Vi (League of Legends), Viktor (League of Legends)

Relationships: Caitlyn/Vi (League of Legends)

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2021-12-08

Updated: 2022-03-22

Packaged: 2022-12-19 10:47:41

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 5

Words: 13,712

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Vi had been attending the University of Zaun for a semester and a half, now, and had never gone to the library until the auspicious occasion on which her academic advisor forced her to start seeing an English tutor.

You know, maybe her avoidance of the library had something to do with her failing English.

Vi's new English tutor is the girl whose house she broke into six years ago, an event which resulted in Vi's arrest and subsequent trip to juvie. And

somehow, Caitlyn is convinced *Vi* ruined *her* life.

1. Please not now

Author's Note:

Title and chapter titles are from Vienna Teng's 'Stray Italian Greyhound' which is one of my favorite Cait/Vi songs and just favorite 'oh no I LIKE you' songs in general.

I am writing an AU because I have absolutely no predictions for where canon is going to lead and also this idea wouldn't leave me alone, and led me to a bunch more ideas which ALSO wouldn't leave me alone. I don't know anything at all about LOL so this is all Arcane babyyyyyy.

Also Cait is a journalism major because I just can't see her wanting to be a cop in modern AU and investigative reporter feels right.

Vi had been attending the University of Zaun for a semester and a half, now, and had never gone to the library until the auspicious occasion on which her academic advisor forced her to start seeing an English tutor.

You know, maybe her avoidance of the library had something to do with her failing English.

She had absolutely no idea where 'Room B13' was, but the girl behind the front desk wasn't too offended when Vi leaned over and stage-whispered, "hi, I have no goddamn clue where I'm going."

She giggled and pushed her glasses a little further up her nose, looking over Vi's e-mail from her professor, which was a feat, given how cracked Vi's phone screen was, and then she instructed her on where to find this fated 'Room B13', which was on the second floor.

Vi knew the second floor of the library from the time she had scaled up the walls of the building to sit on top of the domed roof. It was something students had done probably since the crumbling building was originally erected, and there were plenty of old photos of people stringing underwear

from the flagpole on top or other stupid things like that. Vi had just wanted to see if she could do it in thirty seconds. She'd done it in twenty-six.

From indoors, the second floor was not as well-kept-up as the first. The crown molding had been painted over several times and the newest coat was chipping, showing off old white behind the horrid beige they'd most recently decided on. The carpet was worn through in high traffic areas, and the long hallways with tutoring rooms on either side made the place feel a little bit like an abandoned hotel. UZ was an old institution, and had a hell of a time getting government funding to do much of anything at all. But Vi sure as hell wasn't getting into Piltover, and she *absolutely* was not moving to another city for school.

She found room B13 because there were a whole three labels: antique door numbers that had once been bright brass but were faded over the years, a plastic plaque to the side of the door with the numbers written in braille, and a label sticker at the bottom left corner of the square window in the center of the door.

When she opened the door, it creaked. This very nearly drowned out the incredulous, "*you!?*" from her tutor, said in a manner that Vi hadn't been addressed with since her teenage crime spree years or that time she walked into the restaurant where her ex-girlfriend worked by mistake.

She didn't recognize the girl, at first. Sitting beside a frankly enormous stack of textbooks, she was skinny and dark-haired, and wore a ponytail and a dark brown jacket that fit so well it must have been tailored. She was every inch the academic, she just maybe needed to put on some glasses like that library assistant's and she'd be the number one nerd.

Then, Vi realized where she remembered her from. High school, top of the class, future valedictorian. Her next memory was of this blue-haired little asshole identifying her at the police station as the one who'd broken into her place.

Well, Vi *had* broken into her place.

Vi dropped her backpack and dropped into the chair opposite her tutor's. "Kiramman?" What the hell this councilwoman's daughter was doing going to somewhere that *wasn't* Piltover, Vi had no idea. It was sort of intriguing, although it had an equal chance of being an extremely boring reason.

"It really *is* you." This time, she didn't sound quite so venomous, just shocked. What was her name again? Catherine? Katy?

Caitlyn, the neatly printed (actually printed, like the woman owned a labelmaker) label on her notebook read.

"It really is me," Vi said. "Listen, if you want, I can go back to Prof. H. and ask for a different tutor."

"No, no." Caitlyn shook her head and her ponytail swung back and forth. "I will not allow our personal history to interfere with me doing my job."

"You mean, the fact that your parents got me sent to juvie."

"My life wasn't exactly a picnic after that occasion, either," Caitlyn said crisply, opening her notebook. She had a print-out of Vi's English paper tucked inside the front cover, absolutely littered with red pen. This was going to suck.

"Whatever you say, cupcake." As if any consequence that could have come down on Caitlyn was worse than a *fucking juvenile detention center*.

"Caitlyn."

"But you're so sweet." It was slathered with sarcasm. Caitlyn did not dignify it with a response.

"I thought I was supposed to be tutoring a freshman," Caitlyn said, sort of offhand, unthinking. She was turning to a page full of notes, in her perfectly neat little handwriting. "Aren't you the same year as me?"

"Turns out, an aggravated B&E really disrupts your educational experience. Finished my GED last year. Starting school this year." She'd still graduate at the same time as Caitlyn, but that was because Vi was only beholden to

acquire an associate's degree in order to Not Disappoint Vander, which was the entire reason she was at this godforsaken academy. "That's not really the point, though, is it? The point is that I'm crap at English."

"Your writing itself isn't too terrible," Caitlyn said, which sounded like a hell of a lot of empty words from somebody who had absolutely massacred Vi's English paper.

"Sure looks like you thought it was terrible."

She turned the paper around, and Vi realized she had made a copy for each of them. Of course, Caitlyn got the black-and-white copy, which did not look like a battlefield. "Please observe where most of the markings are," she said. "You have absolutely no grasp of formatting."

"Formatting? I thought you just type it into Word and go. What, do I need different margins?" She scanned over it—there was a little block of text Caitlyn had put in the upper left corner, with such details as 'name' and 'professor's name' and 'due date of assignment'.

She tapped that block of information with her forefinger. Her nail polish was the same blue-black as her hair, and her nails were short enough that Vi could see the tip of her finger past where they ended.

"Yeah, I put all that stuff," Vi said. "Right there in the center." It was directly beneath where Caitlyn had written a 'down' arrow and then 'title'. She needed a *title* for this fucking thing? The assignment had already been tough enough—*write about a favorite memory of your childhood and how it affects you today*. Sure, it was basic shit for most people, but goddamn, Vi's childhood hadn't exactly been sunshine and roses.

"Right, but your professor is going to require all your papers to follow a formatting guide." She passed Vi another print-out. This one was full of nonsense text, *lorem ipsum* shit all the way down. "This is a sample paper that does all of it *correctly*. I'll show you how to reformat this paper, and next session we can go over your grammar, which... needs some improvement."

"Wow, tell me how you really feel," Vi said.

"It's atrocious." She shook her head again. *Swing, swing*, that little ponytail swishing back and forth. "But I ought not to say that, it's deeply unprofessional."

"I don't think library tutoring at university is exactly a 'profession'," Vi replied. "Don't worry about it. I'd rather get your real thoughts. But this formatting shit. Why do I need to do this? I have everything you asked for, except no title, and—well, I didn't put the date."

"There is an academic standard for essays," Caitlyn said.

"Why?"

"I don't know, Vi, maybe because your professor reads thirty of these for each class, and having to search through to figure out where each person placed their details makes basic grading take twice as long?"

Vi folded her arms on the table, looked at the 'academic standards', and nodded. "Alright, yeah. That makes sense. Why didn't you say that in the first place?"

"Well, most people don't care."

"Maybe they should, things seem a lot more reasonable that way."

Vi pulled out her laptop, and unzipped it from the case. The university had given it to her as part of her scholarship, and even though it was secondhand and refurbished, she was only borrowing it and was terrified of it meeting the same fate as her phone. She searched around her desktop and among the clutter of last semester's assignments, she found a document titled 'English 100 Ass. 1'. Technically there was no reason to abbreviate, but Vi's sense of humor was constantly dragged down by all the high schoolers (and the one eighth grader) she lived with.

Caitlyn had a look on her face like Vi was dragging her nails down a chalkboard instead of typing out the date she had to re-turn-in her

assignment by, and coming up with a title, which was a very creative 'Assignment One'. "What?"

"You type like somebody who's just seen a keyboard for the first time yesterday."

She had a tendency to use her first two fingers and her thumb to tap at the keyboard like some kind of velociraptor. "Yeah, my sister makes fun of me for it, too. Laugh it up, I get shit done eventually."

"Well, can you listen whilst you type?"

Of course fucking Caitlyn Kiramman was the kind of person who said 'whilst'. "Yeah, sure." She was just figuring out how to fix her header and footer, anyway.

"Good. I'm going to go over the basic structure of your paper."

"Tear it up, cupcake."

"Shut up, it's mostly fine as is."

It was *not* mostly fine as is.

Caitlyn spent the majority of their thirty-minute session going over just the basic structure of Vi's essay, telling her she needed such things as an *introduction* and a *conclusion* and how some of the details would be better if she moved them closer to the beginning to draw the reader in, like Vi was really trying to make some useless essay about the least traumatic childhood memory she had engaging to an audience.

The worst part of it all was that Caitlyn's suggestions noticeably improved the paper. She wouldn't make changes *for* Vi, but Vi wasn't about to turn down any of her suggestions, not when they were pretty damn good ideas. Caitlyn made no comment on the story itself until the very end of the session, though, right after they re-structured the last paragraph, the '*how it affects you today*' portion of the assignment.

She'd told the story of pretending to be monsters with Powder, and having to chase the monsters away, and then how she wished she could still do that for her sister, but how Powder was going to have to fight her own monsters as she grew up.

And what Caitlyn said was, "I wish I'd had somebody to look out for me the way you look out for your sister."

Vi spent a long moment just looking at her eyes, which were sharp and focused on Vi's screen, as she leaned over the table a bit to point out sections that needed to change with the eraser end of her pencil. That simple admission spoke to a greater truth that Vi just did not understand. Damn if she didn't want to figure it out, though. What had Caitlyn had to face on her own?

"So, your conclusion should restate your introduction, but with the full understanding of everything your reader has just read," Caitlyn continued, barreling past any introspection.

Back to business.

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Caitlyn had the unfortunate mishap of running into Jayce on her way out of the library.

He was probably there to see Viktor, although Viktor himself was nowhere to be found. Sky was behind the desk, chatting with Jayce, who straightened up and gave her a cheerful look that made Caitlyn wish she'd just followed Vi out instead of staying to start working on the assignment for her creative writing class which was turning out to *not* be the cakewalk she'd expected. Sure, it counted towards her major, but journalism was a far cry from creative writing and Caitlyn, as it turned out, was an excellent news writer and had absolutely no creative inspiration whatsoever.

"Caitlyn, it's good to see you, I'd been meaning to talk to you."

"Can you walk with me, then?" she asked, hoping to lose Jayce, who would obviously want to stay behind to meet Viktor. "I would like to pick up a coffee before my next class."

"Sure, of course." Dammit. Maybe he'd seen Viktor already. She resigned herself to a terrible cross-campus trip and walked as quickly as possible. Jayce was giving Sky a frantic goodbye before chasing after Caitlyn.

Caitlyn turned up the collar of her coat and adjusted the knit headband that covered her ears as they left the library and headed across campus to the cafe. Jayce, of course, started the conversation with exactly what Caitlyn had been expecting.

"Your mom and dad wanted me to check up on you."

"They can check up on me themselves," Caitlyn said. "They live in the same house that I do, in fact." Not that either of them were ever around, but of course, Caitlyn understood that her mother's duty as a city councilwoman and her father's medical practice absorbed much of their time. It was more the principle of the thing, of sending Jayce to look after her as if she was still a child who needed him to keep an eye on her after school.

Jayce sighed. "I know you think they're being overprotective. But they care about you. And the program you're in, and your job, it's a lot, especially with your LSATs—"

"I can balance everything perfectly fine."

"You're sure you want to keep the tutoring job on top of everything?"

She walked quickly, making him take advantage of his longer stride to catch up. Her boots crunched on the salted sidewalks, they'd be crusted in white later. "Are you really one to talk about balancing one's education and daily life?" she asked. "How many degrees do you have, Professor Talis?"

"That's soon to be 'doctor' Talis, to you," said Jayce, who was proving her point.

"I'm not going to drop the job," she said.

"Even though you need to focus on law school?"

She needed her *parents* to think she was focused on law school, that her journalism degree was simply a stepping stone to Piltover School of Law. "I am focused enough for all of that."

"Cait." Jayce jogged forward a few steps and then turned around to block her path, making her stop a few feet from the Student Union's entrance. "That's the thing, you're so focused on school. You hardly have a social life. Even though I'm attentive to my studies, I have Mel, and my other friends. You're just like Viktor, you don't notice that people want to get to know you because your attention is elsewhere."

She could not help but roll her eyes. 'Just like Viktor,' who had been mooning after Jayce ever since they worked together on Jayce's masters thesis and Viktor's dissertation. As if Jayce wasn't completely blind to social cues himself. "I'll take it under advisement." She stepped around him, and walked into the building before he could catch up.

She rubbed her thumb over a scuff in her nail polish as she waited on her drink. At least Jayce had distracted her, if only for a moment, from the awful realization that she was obligated to spend thirty minutes every Tuesday and Thursday sitting across a table from the girl who had managed to strain Caitlyn's relationship with her parents nearly to a breaking point.

On one July evening, the summer after Caitlyn's sophomore year of high school, she'd slept with the window cracked. Her summer work for her AP classes was sitting on her desk, and one of the books had fallen off with a loud *thunk* when somebody managed to ease open her second floor window and slip inside.

She'd screamed, of course. She'd woken up the whole damn house. Her father had chased the burglar downstairs and out the front door with his rifle before she could take anything, but Caitlyn had seen her face. She hadn't known Vi's name at the time. Come to think of it, she'd never learned Vi's name. That was why she didn't recognize it on her tutoring schedule.

The evening of the break-in wasn't the horrible part. It was what happened after.

"Extra-hot mocha for Caitlyn!"

She took the cup and thanked the barista, who had spelled her name 'Katelynn'. She had nobody to blame for this but her mother, for giving her a name that could be spelled a half-dozen different ways.

As she stuck a stopper in the opening on her coffee cup and headed across the student center to class, she reconsidered Vi's suggestion to find another tutor. It wasn't that Vi's paper was entirely challenging, it was just that Caitlyn couldn't get past their personal history. And obviously that was unacceptable. Caitlyn was a professional, and she was going to ignore it and press on.

The worst part of all of this, though?

The story Vi had told in her first English-100 essay assignment was more emotionally moving than anything Caitlyn had been able to come up with for her creative writing project.

2. Just settled into a glass half-empty

Summary for the Chapter:

Vi and Caitlyn discuss an upcoming research project, Vi manages to be attractive while eating multiple things in a very unattractive way, Jayce makes an appearance, Vi wants to fight him.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello hello! It's been a while since I've worked on this so I've been loath to post much more out of fear I won't get it done but also.... why not? I have the thing, might as well share the thing!

"We're opening in fifteen, put that away and get behind the bar or go upstairs to work on it," Vander said, tapping Vi on the shoulder as he passed.

"Gimme five and I'll get this done," she said. She was seated at a barstool with her laptop on the bar in front of her, making her latest round of corrections from her third tutoring session with Caitlyn. Technically, these didn't need to be wrapped up before Thursday, because her paper wasn't due until the following Monday, but there was something about her last few sessions that made her want to exceed expectations.

She wanted to show Caitlyn up.

Although Caitlyn said positive things about her writing at times, it was clear she didn't like Vi and clearer that she thought Vi's public-school education was beneath Caitlyn's superior academic career, except, oh wait, *they literally went to the same school* up until the Incident. The difference was all Caitlyn's private tutors and weekend SAT prep sessions and AP classes. But now Vi was gonna use all Caitlyn's fancy tutoring knowledge against her and prove that she didn't even need Caitlyn's help, really... except that she totally, completely did.

"You know you can take tonight off if you need time for schoolwork," Vander said. "Send Mylo down, he can bus tables as easily as you."

Mylo couldn't serve liquor though, which meant Vander would be responsible for everything behind the bar. And sure, it was just a Wednesday, but the Last Drop was always pretty full. "I said I'm fine," Vi replied.

"How is school, anyway?" Vander asked, back to her as he examined their stock.

"Alright. My tutor is... something else. But at least she knows what she's talking about."

"You meet up with her twice a week?"

"Tuesdays and Thursdays," she confirmed. Goddamit, if Caitlyn asked her for one more citation in this thing, she was going to scream. She'd written about the history of the Lanes for a reason—her source was *Vander*. How was she supposed to cite 'my dad told me'? She noted this.

"Is it helping?" Vander asked.

She only shrugged. "I'm getting better grades, if that's what you mean." On the one assignment she'd resubmitted, at least. Her professor hadn't looked at this one yet, but it had enough of Caitlyn's red pen on it that Vi was pretty sure if she followed all those instructions, she'd pass. The worries were reserved for next semester, when she didn't have Caitlyn and her red pen.

"You're working hard," Vander said, which didn't feel totally true. Caitlyn was working hard, certainly. Vi was just following her along.

"More like hardly working," she said breezily, snapping her laptop shut and getting up to start her shift, hollering at Powder to go mess around with her robots somewhere that wasn't the bar. That kid got all the smarts in the family. She was gonna be some kind of genius engineer someday, Vi knew it.

Vander clapped her on the shoulder as she stepped around the bar. "I'm proud of you, kid," he said, and even after all this time, that still made Vi want to tear up a little bit. She elbowed him in the side to avoid that feeling.

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"Cite it as a personal interview," Caitlyn said, because she knew immediately how to fix Vi's problem as soon as she saw Vi's sticky note that read 'IDK WHAT TO DO WITH THIS I JUST ASKED MY DAD'. She then rattled off the precise way to write out said citation faster than Vi could type it because Vi, again, typed like a velociraptor.

"How are you this smart?" she muttered under her breath.

"My parents had me in some sort of tutoring since the age of seven," Caitlyn answered. "That's how I met Jayce, actually."

"Seven? Didn't you have time to, like, have fun?"

"I had extracurriculars. Horseback riding and sharpshooting. I even competed with a rifle for a short while." Ah, yes, rich people sports. Vi was just glad she didn't say she golfed, because then she'd have to request a different tutor for *sure*. Caitlyn already had the posh little accent, if she got any more preppy, Vi would be obligated to never speak to her again.

"But you don't do any of that stuff now," Vi said. "Because of all these." She rapped her knuckles on Caitlyn's ever-present stack of textbooks. "Right?"

"I don't, no. I haven't had the time."

"What are these for, anyway?" She thumbed at the corner of the book, making the pages slip past in a satisfying rustle.

"They are LSAT prep workbooks." Particularly snippy.

"LSAT? Isn't that a law school thing? Aren't you some kind of writer person?" Vi kept flipping through the corner of Caitlyn's book while she

talked. Caitlyn thumped a hand down on the cover to keep her from doing it again.

"I am majoring in journalism, because Piltover School of Law does not have any specific degree prerequisites. I will have my LSATs next year, and with a good enough application and a demonstration that I am committed to bettering my academic community—" she gestured at the table between them, referring to her tutoring job, "—I'll get in."

In absence of Caitlyn's book to fiddle with, Vi started turning a pencil between her fingertips. "And why do you sound like you're announcing your own death when you talk about that?"

She sighed, sweeping her hair back from her face. It wasn't in a ponytail today, and she kept having to tuck it behind her ear. "Because there is nothing I want less than to follow in my mother's footsteps and become a lawyer and a politician." She gave the books a withering stare. "There is nothing I want more than to *actually use my journalism degree*. I don't want to be stuck behind a desk, I want to travel, I want to do something that actually sparks change in the world."

Three tutoring sessions ago, if you had asked Vi whether she could imagine Caitlyn as an on-the-ground journalist in some sort of remote locale or dangerous situation, she would have said 'hell no' and would have probably laughed her whole ass off. Today, the fire in Caitlyn's eyes told her otherwise. Also the fact that apparently she knew how to shoot a rifle, which was a quality Vi found kind of hot.

"So just flunk your big lawyer test. They can't make you go to law school if you fail out. You're twenty-one, Caitlyn, you should be able to do what the hell you want. Your parents should treat you like an adult."

"You would think that, wouldn't you," she said.

"Uh, yeah."

Caitlyn shook her head. "Fix those citations."

"Yes, ma'am."

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When Caitlyn arrived to the tutoring session following the one in which she'd admitted aloud how much she deplored the idea of law school, Vi was already there, tipped back in her chair, her booted feet crossed on the table. Caitlyn couldn't complain about this, it wasn't *her* table. Next to Vi's laptop, there was a styrofoam take-out box opened to reveal two cupcakes with slightly squashed icing.

"For you," Vi said, nudging the box toward her. "Since you're so sweet." She sounded less sarcastic than she had the first time she'd said this. Caitlyn was a bit concerned by that. She did not want Vi actually thinking she was sweet.

Caitlyn eyed the cupcakes suspiciously. They looked like chocolate.

"Well, one's for you. If you don't want it, I'll eat 'em both." Vi said, snatching one of them and peeling back the paper wrapper. "They were passing them out at the student org fair at the Union. Got 'em from the LGBT alliance booth. Also I got four girls' phone numbers in like twenty minutes." She seemed vaguely astonished by this fact, as if she wasn't every woman who wanted a hot punk girlfriend's wet dream. "Anyway, they had these in like a whole rainbow. So you get blue, I get pink."

"Thank you, then," Caitlyn said, taking a seat and unwrapping her own cupcake. It wasn't the same color blue as her hair, a soft pastel instead.

There really was no polite way to eat a cupcake. Vi bit hers in half and didn't bother to stop talking for her chewing and it was *absolutely disgusting* but her tongue also darted out of her mouth to catch a stray crumb on her lower lip, and she thumbed away a smear of icing from the corner of her mouth. Caitlyn filed that behavior under 'things that would give her mother a goddamn heart attack' and drew herself away from the distraction that was the tiny scar on Vi's upper lip and tuned back into the conversation after what felt like a full fifteen minutes of staring and giving mostly non-answers.

"You want to write your final paper about what?"

"The difference in quality of foster and adoption care systems between Piltover central and the Lanes," Vi said.

"Isn't it all run by the same government entity? The Lanes are a part of Piltover," Caitlyn said.

Vi shook her head. "It might be run by the same people, but it's not the same. The system in the Lanes is overrun, and there's too much bureaucracy stopping people who genuinely want to take care of all the kids there. Me and Powder were stuck in a group home for years because it took so long for Vander to get some stupid credentials and enough money to pay for it."

"Hold on," Caitlyn said, setting down her cupcake, which was starting to crumble because she'd been trying to eat it by pulling off little bits of it. "I'm not following."

"Oh. I thought you knew." Vi let the legs of her chair clack to the ground.

"If you don't want to tell me, that's alright."

"No, I'm fine with it. My parents died when I was eleven. It was just me and my sister for a while. Vander used to help out at my school—he doesn't have kids, and when he found out about us, he wanted to take us in. But he was just some single guy who lives above the bar he owns and has priors. And the bureaucrats prefer well-adjusted moms and dads, but there aren't a lot of those to come by in the Lanes."

"Those don't always turn out well. I'm glad you had Vander," Caitlyn said. "When did you start living with him?"

"Soon as I got released. He adopted both of us right after the trial, but he wasn't my legal guardian then, so he couldn't talk them into going easier on me. Also I cussed out the judge."

Caitlyn frowned, looking down at the syllabus for Vi's English 100 class. The assignment was for a compare/contrast research project. "I think we

can make this fit the rubric, but my concern is that you're not going to be able to find the kind of scholarly research your professor wants for this. It's all going to be anecdotal, and I don't think interviews will fit the requirements."

"So, you're saying 'pick something else'," Vi said.

Caitlyn finished her cupcake and crumpled up the wrapper with all the crumbs tucked inside. "I'm saying you need to broaden things a bit. Keeping this devoted to Piltover solely isn't going to suit the assignment, but there are probably country-wide studies we can look at that compare the difference in quality of life between children who are adopted and children who spend extended time in the foster care system. That way, you can argue that adoption should be more accessible in general, and use your personal life story as the *pathos* to back it up."

Vi was nodding along, and she reached for her notebook, turning it back around so that she could write what Caitlyn was noting for her. Her handwriting, like her grammar, was atrocious. Somehow, the fact that it was all-caps did not make it any easier to read.

Eventually she stopped writing, tapping her pencil against the page. "This feels a little bit like cheating," Vi said.

"Hm?"

"I mean, you're just coming up with this stuff and I'm just using it." She flicked the pencil through her fingers as she spoke.

"It's called 'brainstorming', you don't have to worry about it," Caitlyn said. Still. She'd been tutoring for years now, and rare was the occasion on which a student didn't want to just take her ideas and go with them, or worse, convince Caitlyn to write their papers for them. "We're collaborating, after all. You're the one who came up with this idea in the first place."

"Yeah. Alright," Vi said, still a bit dubious. "Well, if I get an A on this, I'm paying you back in more cupcakes."

"Acceptable," Caitlyn said. "Thank you for this, really." She wiggled the wrapper to indicate. "I hadn't exactly eaten anything today."

"What, really?" Vi swiveled and looked at her laptop screen. "It's three P.M.!"

"I had breakfast?" Never mind that it consisted mostly of coffee. Only of coffee, actually.

Vi gave her a dubious look that said perhaps she knew this was true. "Alright, we're getting lunch."

"What about the rest of our session...?"

"I'll bring an outline on Thursday. That's what you want, right?" That was, indeed, what she wanted. "C'mon. Food, now."

"Haven't you already had lunch?" Caitlyn asked, although Vi was already packing up her laptop and Caitlyn found herself following despite any questions or complaints.

"Second lunch," Vi proclaimed, and headed out the door before Caitlyn had any time to protest.

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She found herself in one of the booths outside the only dining establishment in the Student Union that was open outside regular lunch and dinner hours. It had the style of a quick service restaurant, except it stocked everything from sandwiches to burritos to stir fry, and none of it was very good. Caitlyn picked up a salad, which at least could not be screwed up too terribly. Vi was eating a milkshake and fries. Caitlyn didn't even know this place sold milkshakes.

Vi was also dipping her fries in her milkshake, which looked absolutely horrible. "Want to try?" she asked, deliberately misinterpreting Caitlyn's look of disgust.

"No, thank you." She went back to her salad.

Vi shrugged in a way that said 'suit yourself' and scooped another dollop of chocolate milkshake out with her fries.

"My sister thinks this is gross, too. Powder won't eat any foods that touch each other, even now. She picks apart sandwiches and eats each part separate—it's not that she doesn't like the stuff, she just doesn't like them together. Except tomatoes. I eat those for her."

"One doesn't have to be particular to know *that* is disgusting." Caitlyn gestured at her milkshake.

"It's actually not," Vi said, but she'd finished her fries, which meant Caitlyn got to watch her tongue chase her straw around so that she could drink the rest of her milkshake instead of using it as a condiment. There was no objective reason to be annoyed by that, other than the fact that it should have looked silly, but Vi managed to be confident in all contexts. She looked like she was about to continue to argue the benefits of combining fries and milkshakes (none, it likely equaled soggy fries and a salty shake) which Caitlyn would have gladly listened to over what she next heard.

"Cait, hey!"

She slowly turned, part of her hoping that somebody else she knew just happened to have the same warm, winning voice as Jayce Talis. Come to think of it, if Jayce wasn't such a total academic, he might be a good politician. Well, a horrible one, but a successful one.

"Professor Talis," she said, deliberately refusing to use his first name or 'doctor'.

Jayce nodded to Vi and then continued talking to Caitlyn. "I was wondering if you had plans yet for spring break?"

"Yes," she said. "My mother's gala."

He folded his arms, probably well aware this was not the truth. Well, it was a half truth. She was going to her mother's gala, but this would not take up her entire spring break. "Well, listen. I have three tickets to a STEM-

focused tour of the museums of Piltover, and Mel cancelled on me for some reason, so let me know if you'd like to come along, or I'll ask Viktor if he has anybody he wants to invite."

"Just cut your losses and go with Viktor," she said, although she was intrigued as to why Mel had cancelled. Her schedule was always airtight, she couldn't possibly have double-booked herself. Why was she avoiding Jayce? At the annual Kiramman holiday party a month and a half ago, the two of them had been practically attached at the lips. Caitlyn had never disparaged her mother's choice to decorate with mistletoe more.

"Are you sure?" He rubbed at his insanely square jaw. "I'd really like to get to spend some time with you. It's been a while."

Had he realized this was perhaps due to the 'being glued to his girlfriend and/or his research depending on the hour' aspect of his life?

"I'll consider it," she said. She would consider cancelling on him last-minute.

"Good, thanks." Jayce leaned over to hug her, patting her on the shoulder before heading off through the Student Union in the direction of the exit closest to the science building, aka Jayce Talis' home-away-from-home.

Vi was looking at her like they'd just been approached by a ghost, not a wayward professor-slash-doctoral student. "Dude. Did that professor just hit on you?"

"What?" Caitlyn spluttered. "No. Jayce has known me since I was a child, he's like my older brother!"

Vi deflated back into her seat, leaning her head against the back of the booth. "Oh my god that makes so much more sense," she said. "Damn, I was worried I was gonna have to fight him for a second."

"You don't have to fight anybody on my behalf," Caitlyn said.

"I'll fight anyone who's a creep," Vi said, returning to her milkshake now that her concerns were defused. "Professor or not."

"He's not a creep, he's an idiot."

"Oh. Well I can't pick a bone with idiots." She stirred her milkshake with her straw. "I'd have to fight myself."

"Trust me, you're not an idiot. I've spent enough time with Jayce to know that."

Notes for the Chapter:

Raise your hands if you, too, were one of the girls who gave Vi her phone number because uhhhh, I for sure would be.

3. Just stopped believing in happy endings

Summary for the Chapter:

Vi visits her academic advisor, gets her back piece finished, and invites Caitlyn to her place. Caitlyn is gifted more desserts, meets Vi's little sister, and discovers she has a thing for women with tattoos.

Notes for the Chapter:

Long time no see! I've not been working on this bad boy much because I've been doing novel stuff and a space/android/pirate Iliad thing. Anyhow I got to introduce a few folks in this chapter but my favorite has to be Heimerdinger's scene bc it was fun to turn a lil creechur into a lil old man.

Vi's academic advisor's office was the single most distracting place in the world. There wasn't an inch of wall space that wasn't taken up by weird clocks, wall art made mostly of gears, framed photos of trains, and an enormous bulletin board full of notes and cards and other various paraphernalia that changed with the seasons.

Vi didn't exactly know why she got assigned to Heimerdinger, probably because he was the kind of person who was nice enough to serve as advisor for students who chose such paths as 'General Studies' rather than selecting a particular major. He was a small old man whose facial features were mostly MUSTACHE and nothing else. Actually, not just his facial features. All his features just said MUSTACHE. When you thought of him, all you remembered was facial hair.

The chair beside his desk was a little bit short, probably to make Prof H seem taller. It meant Vi's knees were higher up than they should have been, and she sat in a sort of hunch.

"So, Violet," said Heimerdinger, who was the type of person to constantly call people by their full name, whether or not you told him you had a

nickname, "have you given any more thought to my option of extending your course of study to cover a bachelor's degree?"

She had definitely not.

"My financial aid covers two years of tuition," Vi said. "I can't exactly pay for two more myself." And if anybody in the family was gonna take on student loans, it was gonna be Powder. She was so much smarter than Vi, she deserved a way more extensive education.

"Correct! However—" and here, he sorted through a lot of papers, his little hands moving very quickly, "—you see, there is an option for an academic scholarship for somebody who is coming out of an associate's program and starting a bachelor's degree. Full tuition." He handed her a brochure with the ZU logo which, when unfolded, revealed so much 8-pt. text Vi would need an hour to read it all.

"There's no way my GPA is high enough for this shit," she said, tacking on a, "sir," as if that would make up for her profanity.

He wagged a finger at her. "Not *yet*, Violet, no yet. But it is not impossible. In fact, it is quite possible, and quite *probable* that you could reach this grade point average."

She seriously doubted that.

"That is not to say it will not be challenging. You will need to achieve at least an eighty-one-point-five percent in all of your classes this semester and for the duration of next year. You will have to study hard, apply yourself..."

He went on and on about what she would *have* to do. There was no way, though. There was no goddamn way. Maybe somebody brilliant like Caitlyn could do this—hell, Caitlyn could do 81.5% in her sleep—but Vi... no. She'd been joking a few days ago when she told Caitlyn she was an idiot, but she was still very aware that her intelligence did not exactly extend to book-smarts.

"...but it is something you can most certainly accomplish!"

It was really hard to say 'hell no' to such a kind old man. Vi worked her thumbnail against the corner of the brochure, splitting the layers of thick cardstock. She looked down at it while she said, "I'll try, Professor H."

He shook her hand on the way out and gave her one of those weird little off-brand hard candies that nice old people always seemed to have. She was still clacking it around between her teeth when she left the building, stuffing her hands in her pockets and pulling her hood up as she made her way to the library.

It was a Wednesday, not her usual appointment with Caitlyn, but she didn't have Caitlyn's phone number and she wasn't totally sure what her student email was (although it was probably unlikely there was a different ckiramman@student.zaun.edu out there). Vi didn't even know if Caitlyn would be in the library at all, much less at her usual spot, but she did know by now that the girl who worked the desk (Sky, her name was Sky) was Caitlyn's friend.

Anyway, it wouldn't hurt to drop by. It was on the way.

The problem was that Sky was not behind the desk.

Instead, it was a man who looked too old to be a traditional student. He was tall and extremely lanky, with messy brown hair and bags under his eyes so big they'd break an airplane's weight limit. He was seated on one of those half-stool, half-chair sort of situations, squinting at the library computer when Vi entered. He didn't look up.

"Hi?"

That finally got his attention. He *did* seem to work there—he had a name tag that read 'Viktor'—but there was none of Sky's usual helpful-librarian-ness in the way he said, "yes?"

"Uh, so, I'm looking for a tutor."

"Tutoring applications are on the school website," he said. He had a lilting accent that made his voice nice to listen to even if he sounded extremely bored or tired.

"No, no, I already *have* a tutor, I just wanted to know if she was here right now. Caitlyn Kiramman?"

"I cannot give out tutors' work schedules," he said, and Vi thought *yikes*, because it felt like there was a reason behind that particular rule.

"Okay, then, I can just go up and check, I guess?"

He cocked his head and gave her a more analytical look. "Are you..." he searched for a moment. "Violet?"

"Vi, yeah."

He nodded. "She did mention you. She is in class."

Did Caitlyn just know everybody on campus staff? "Well, if you'll see her, I can leave a note. I just have to cancel our session for tomorrow. I have an appointment—"

"What's this about?"

And there she was, Queen of the Nerds herself, walking in from the library atrium wearing a fluffy white scarf, a royal blue pea coat, and an actual beret that matched her scarf exactly. Her heeled boots clicked on the tile floor of the library entrance, and then softened as she hit carpeting. Someone ought to tell Caitlyn she couldn't both be Queen of the Nerds and look like a fashion model all the time.

Viktor went back to whatever he was doing on the computer, content that they did not require his assistance any longer.

"I can't meet you on Thursday, I've got a thing," Vi repeated.

"What thing?" Caitlyn asked, unwinding her scarf from around her neck and somehow not disturbing her beret while doing it.

"None of your business, but my appointment to get my back piece finished."

"Your tattoo?" As if she could have meant anything else with that. "It goes all the way onto your back?"

Given that it was the middle of winter, obviously Caitlyn would not have known that. She'd seen the tail ends of Vi's sleeves when Vi rolled up her hoodies and nothing else. "Yup. Connecting the two sides. Anyway, do you want to reschedule or something? Maybe Friday?"

Caitlyn shook her head. "Friday won't work. I could meet with you Saturday, if that's not too much trouble—although, the library is closed. There is the public library, I've never been, but..."

"No problem," Vi said with a shrug. "I live like a ten-minute walk from here. You know the Last Drop?" Vander's place was among a little strip of bars, cafes, and shops, all of which catered to the college students' tastes more than the Last Drop did. Most of the people who patronized Vander's establishment were old regulars—some of them even knew it from back when Silco was running it alongside Vander and Benzo, although that was the *era of which we do not speak*. But the college students would come around every Friday and Saturday, when the bar was open late, not for drinks but for something that was fried and made of carbs and covered with cheese.

Caitlyn did not seem to know what Vi was talking about, she had this sort of stalled-out look on her face as she tried to remember. "I'm sure I can find it," she said.

"It's down the street from the cafe with the green windows."

"*Oh!* yes, I know where that is." Trust Caitlyn to know where the coffee was and not where the party was. Or the after-party, rather.

"So, when you go in the front door, there's a staircase on the left that's roped off, hop the rope and come up, the apartment's up there," Vi directed her. "Is two-thirty still good?"

"Fine by me," she said, although she looked like she was rearranging her study schedule in her head.

"Awesome, thanks!" Vi patted her twice on the shoulder before she left, and for some reason this made Viktor look up again. Maybe he just wanted to talk to Cait once Vi was done. Vi didn't care, really—she was way too excited for her tattoo appointment to take her mind far, far away from the idea of spending two more years at this school.

— — —

The bar? restaurant? *establishment* itself was closed when Caitlyn arrived on the dot at two-thirty to meet with Vi, having to remind herself more than once that this was just their standard tutoring session. As described, the staircase on the left side of the little entry hall had a cord with a 'Staff Only' sign hanging across, but it was easy to step over it and walk up the stairs to a narrow landing with a wall of coat hooks and a front door with a mail slot.

She knocked, and heard, "*grab the door for me!*" from inside, followed by the thump of footsteps as someone ran across the apartment and the metallic slide of a deadbolt opening.

It wasn't Vi behind the door, but a young girl with bright turquoise hair tied in pigtail braids that fell to her mid-back. She was dressed in a paint-spattered T-shirt that read 'Zaun Middle School Robotics Team' and when she turned to holler into the depths of the apartment, Caitlyn could see 'JINX' printed on the back of it like it was a surname on a sports jersey.

"Vi! It's some girl!"

She looked enough like Vi in the face that Caitlyn could reasonably guess this was her little sister.

"Gimme a second—ow, *fuck!*" That was definitely Vi, shouting from around a corner. The apartment was clearly old construction, all the rooms divided up instead of being an open floor plan like all the newer places seemed to be. There was a rug in the entryway where Caitlyn stood that had definitely

seen better days, and she recognized Vi's boots sitting in the corner along with a pair of pink sneakers.

Vi's sister (what was her name? It was something odd.) rolled her eyes and stuck out her hand. "Hi, I'm Powder, and my sister is a dumbass."

"I'm Caitlyn, it's good to meet you." She did not need to remark on Vi's dumbassery, because she was already quite well aware of this fact.

Vi appeared around the corner and Caitlyn left the foyer, getting a look at the living room. It was cozy, with a big overstuffed leather couch and a matching armchair, a few multicolored throw blankets scattered across the furniture, and an old radiator underneath the window. In the very middle of the room, where there would have been a coffee table if it hadn't been shoved off to the side, was what looked like the results of a bomb going off.

Powder clearly was not wearing the robotics team T-shirt for show. There were little metal scraps and screwdrivers and battery packs and all manner of colorful wires strewn out across a flattened-out cardboard box, which Powder went right back to without paying Caitlyn any more attention.

Vi was holding a plate, and rapped her knuckles on Powder's head before setting it down on one of the very small empty spaces in the mess. There was a little stack of cookies on it. "Have a snack," she said. "Your big ol' brain won't work if you don't eat something."

Powder didn't even look up from the wires she was fiddling with to snatch up a cookie and stuff it in her mouth, half of it hanging out while she continued to work.

"Hey," Vi finally said to Caitlyn, heading back from whence she'd come and gesturing to Caitlyn to follow. "Sorry, I was trying to get these out of the oven."

She was referring to the cookies, which were now sitting on top of what little counter space was available in the kitchen. The apartment itself was narrow and so the kitchen was, too, and most of the counters were covered in drying dishes and all manner of appliance. The cookies were just on a

sheet of baking paper, as if Vi had removed them from the oven by lifting the edges of the paper and sliding them off the tray.

Given that she was running a slightly-burned fingertip under some cold water, that assumption was mostly confirmed.

"It's no problem," Caitlyn said. "Should we sit at the table?" The dining table was also fairly crowded, this time with a lot of boxes, all of which seemed to be full of dry goods, possibly for the restaurant downstairs. They could probably find a bare six inches to situate their notes for the tutoring session. This was going to be a lot more chaotic than a designated library room.

"Oh, no, I don't wanna disturb Powder too much," Vi said. "She's working on something new. Upstairs, c'mon." She snatched a plate and scooped several cookies onto it, bringing them with.

Caitlyn hadn't even been aware this place *had* an upstairs.

The stairs were at the back end of the kitchen, which was a strange place for stairs to be, and they led up to an attic room that was very clearly Vi's.

The bed was shoved to the side so that a punching bag could hang in the center of the room, and there was a collage of band posters tacked onto the sloped ceilings. The bed sat close to the floor so that you could mostly sit up straight on it even with the ceiling going so low, and the bottom of the bed functioned as clothes drawers, one of which Vi had to kick shut when they walked in. The room wasn't messy but it was cluttered far beyond what Caitlyn's mother would allow (the Kiramman home was on the Piltover historic register and they had to be prepared for somebody to come tour it at any time).

There was a desk underneath one of the dormer windows, and Vi's laptop was sitting in the center, along with a page of Caitlyn's notes from last session. The only decoration actually in a frame was the photo on her desk—her and Powder, much younger. Vi's hair wasn't shaved on the side and she didn't have any piercings.

"Uh, sorry there isn't a lot of room to sit," Vi picked up her laptop and her notes and took the bed, leaving the desk chair for Caitlyn, who set her backpack down beside it and pulled out her own laptop, putting it on her lap instead of on the desk so she could look at Vi while they reviewed.

The first thing Caitlyn saw when she opened her laptop was her creative writing mid-term project, which she instinctively minimized to hide it from Vi.

There was truly no reason to feel that way, except that Vi had something to do with the story she'd chosen to write. It was about an older sister watching her younger sister go through heartbreak and trying to protect her from the world, and discovering that it was impossible to keep her from ever getting hurt. None of the scenarios matched anything Vi had told her about Powder, but it was close enough that she would recognize that she was the inspiration.

Not that a simple glance at a page would be enough for that. Not that Vi could even see her laptop screen at this angle.

"Your outline itself looks good," Caitlyn said. "I think what we need to focus on today is which of your sources you're going to use, and how you're going to use them."

"Oh, great. Research." Vi bit one of the cookies in half, tipping her head back to keep crumbs from falling onto her paper. After she stuffed the other half in her mouth, too, she held the plate out to Caitlyn and made a noise Caitlyn understood as *do you want one?* At least she wasn't trying to talk with her mouth full again.

Caitlyn took one, holding it over her left hand, which was actually a less effective way of keeping crumbs from getting everywhere, as there were now some in her palm and she had no idea what to do with them. The cookie was still warm, sweet and strongly flavored with cinnamon. "Did you make these?" she asked, before taking another bite. She flicked the crumbs into the wastebasket when she was done.

"Yeah. Can't make cupcakes but it's hard to fuck up a snickerdoodle."

They went back and forth over Vi's sources, a couple of journal articles and some news reports she had found. There was one book, too, but Vi was only using some snippets from an excerpt, as she didn't want to buy the book, but her professor was requiring at least one for their bibliography. Caitlin didn't really see the point in that, given the universality of online information, but working within a professor's requirement was a necessity of her job.

Eventually, it became somewhat of a nuisance to talk back and forth while each looking at their own screens ("It's on page four." "I'm looking at it on a browser, I don't have page numbers." "It's paragraph... thirteen?") and Caitlyn shut her laptop, slid it back into her messenger bag, and sat beside Vi on the bed, watching her scroll through.

She leaned in to point something out and Vi hissed and shifted away from her.

"Sorry!" Caitlyn said, backing up so far she could no longer see the screen.

"Oh, no, it's not—I'm just sore."

Right. She got a tattoo yesterday. Caitlyn hummed, trying to sound sympathetic, although she knew absolutely nothing about the tattooing process. "Did it... go well?"

"Yeah, it looks great," Vi said brightly. "But it's a lot of blackwork. At least I don't have any color. Or shading. It's gonna be worse when it gets itchy."

Caitlyn nodded along. "What does it look like?" she asked, because that sounded like the polite thing to inquire about.

She expected Vi to pull up a picture on her phone or her laptop from the studio. She did *not* expect Vi to pull off her hoodie, revealing that both her arms were heavily tattooed all the way to her shoulders, as well as the new ink spreading across her back. She was in a simple loose tank top, but it was cut low in the back, the sort of thing you were supposed to wear with a sports bra underneath, but Vi had neglected that part so as not to irritate her freshly completed tattoo.

"How red is it?" Vi asked, craning around as if she was going to look at her own back.

"Not very," Caitlyn replied, tucking her hair behind her ear as she leaned in to examine the part of the design that had just been finished and was covered with a clear plastic bandage.

She may have examined some other things while she was at it. All the bulky winter clothing Vi had been wearing was really not doing any favors for her, and it had hidden how *strong* Vi was, especially the muscles in her biceps and her shoulders.

"Feels better not to have anything touching it, I'm not putting that back on," she said, flicking her hoodie away for good measure. "My arms were easier, I got those done in the summer. But I couldn't go outside."

"Why not?"

"Sun," Vi said, looking at her like it was deeply obvious. "Oh, right. You definitely don't have any."

"My mother would kill me if I came home with a tattoo," Caitlyn said.

Vi only shrugged. The movement of her bare shoulders with it was enchanting. "Get it somewhere she'll never see it."

"Oh, I'm sure that's the only way that would ever happen. And what would you suggest for me? Since you're clearly an expert in this." She wondered whether all Vi's tattoos had been done by the same artist.

Vi set her laptop to the side, giving Caitlyn a thoughtful once-over. She had to lean in close to do it. The front neckline of her shirt hung loose and Caitlyn resolutely did not look down it. "I think... you know those old books from the medieval times or whatever? With the big curly letters and the fancy borders?"

"Illuminated manuscripts?" Caitlyn asked.

Vi snapped her fingers. "Yes! Those. I think something like one of those, a little bit abstract. Over your ribs, maybe, but ribs hurt." Part of Vi's shoulder tattoo swung down over her ribcage. Caitlyn could see it poking around the armholes of her shirt. "You seem pretty tough, though, for a little cupcake."

"Quit calling me that," Caitlyn said, shoving at her shoulder, careful not to touch her back. *God*, her muscles were firm and her skin was warm and Caitlyn wanted to keep touching her.

"Hey, Cait..." Vi began, pausing like she was searching for words.

It was, of course, the perfect moment for an interruption.

"Vi!" There was a thundering of footsteps up the stairs, and then Powder poked her head into the room. "Vi. Do you have any paperclips?"

Vi sat ramrod-straight, putting a few extra inches between herself and Caitlyn. "That depends, are you going to bend them into unusable shapes? And if so, how many are going to be victims of your destruction?"

Powder held up two fingers. "Two or three to bend into unusable shapes and put into a robot. A bunch more to make into a necklace. You will never get them back either way."

Vi muttered, "yeah, fine, what the hell do I ever use paperclips for anyways," and gestured at her desk. "Left drawer."

"Thank you!" Powder chirped, rifling through noisily.

Vi shrugged back into her sweatshirt, despite her earlier complaints, and Caitlyn felt oddly as if the moment they'd been in had the curtains pulled down from around it, and now the sunlight of everyday life was blinding through.

As Powder trotted off, Caitlyn cleared her throat and continued where they had left off. "So, if you wanted to use this entire paragraph, you would need to format it as a block quote."

"Yeah, cool, one question: what the hell is a block quote?"

4. You had to come along, didn't you?

Summary for the Chapter:

Valentine's Day, formalwear, and a first date that's not a first date.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello again and thank you once more for all the kind comments on my previous chapters!

Gonna level with y'all, thanks to some personal feelings stuff, writing this fic has gotten really emotional for me--in a negative way. I do have material for one more chapter after this one, but I've taken a break from working on it and other Arcane stuff and so the next chapter is probably gonna be the last update for a while.

That said, I'm still writing plenty, and if you're into original works about Greek Mythology, I've got one of those on the way soon!

When Caitlyn left Vi's house after their Saturday session, Vi walked her to the front door and held it open for her, which was oddly chivalrous of her. Perhaps not oddly. Maybe this was just the sort of thing Vi did when she invited somebody to her house. Their session had gone on a little long; it was getting close to four o'clock, and Vi had sent her with a ziplock bag of snickerdoodles.

And then, at the door, she had asked Caitlyn, *"hey, do you want to go to a party next weekend?"*

Caitlyn had been absolutely baffled by this invite, until Vi explained that it was a contrived Valentine's Day-themed party in which you were supposed to bring a date, but rules dictated it had to be someone you'd never gone out with before. They were calling it a 'First Date' party. It was incredibly stupid.

But Vi had said, *"if you're really not trying to get into law school, why waste time studying for your LSATs instead of, y'know, having fun?"* and Caitlyn really had no argument for that.

Vi had also said, *"I'd ask literally any of my other friends but we've all at least tried dating at one point or another, and they'd laugh me out of the building if I showed up with a guy."*

Caitlyn supposed she should have been offended that she was Vi's last choice, but Vi's rambling explanation of why she'd asked did feel like a case of *protesting too much*.

She'd asked if there was a dress code, to which the answer was, *"iunno, Valentine's?"* and so she'd worn red, because pink really wasn't her color and she didn't trust a college party with anything white. She also didn't trust a college party with her favorite blazer, and so she went with a leather jacket, cropped to fall just at the waist of her dress. She was well aware that this was a good look on her.

But Vi had outdone herself.

She met Caitlyn near the library, because the house was near campus, and in the dark of the evening, Caitlyn could hardly see her. They exchanged pleasantries during the ten-minute walk over, as much as Vi *did* pleasantries.

It was only when they got inside that she truly saw what Vi looked like tonight and she found herself feeling like she'd been knocked off her feet.

Vi was hanging up the long coat she'd had buttoned up to her throat in a closet just inside the front door. Underneath, she was wearing a button-down shirt in a soft off-white, tucked into dress slacks that were a shade darker than Caitlyn's dress. She had suspenders on, and somehow managed to make them not look ridiculous. Her shirt was only buttoned to her sternum, and her sleeves were rolled up to show off her tattoos.

"Okay, so I know you don't go to this kind of shit a lot, so follow my lead," she said.

"I go to parties," Caitlyn scoffed.

"Right. You don't go to *this kind of shit*."

That much was true. Most of the events Caitlyn attended were populated by people largely her parents' age, with a few scattered attendees who were closer to Jayce's. She was often the youngest person at those sorts of banquets and galas and city council formal ceremonies.

In complete honesty, she had expected a college party to be a 'flashing lights and thumping bass' sort of affair, with dancing and an enormous drunken crowd. There was music playing here, but it was subdued enough that you could hear somebody talk over it. The home was small, narrow, one half of a duplex, and the living room housed a semicircle of people playing a drinking game with cards. Vi passed them, heading straight for the kitchen.

She greeted somebody who seemed to be the host, procured drinks for herself and Caitlyn, and introduced Caitlyn to the room at large. The drink wasn't half bad, vodka mixed with blackberry ginger ale, and it turned out flavored ginger ale could cover a multitude of sins.

They were talking about sports—hockey, which Caitlyn didn't know Vi followed. Vi was animated and talked with her hands, laughed loud and kept a hand planted on the countertop behind Caitlyn's back when she wasn't gesturing. Somebody moved past them to get into one of the cabinets, and that hand curled behind Caitlyn's waist and pulled her to Vi's side.

"So, Katie," one of Vi's friends said, and it took Caitlyn a moment to realize he was talking to her.

"Caitlyn," Vi corrected on her behalf.

"Caitlyn. Right. How did you get unlucky enough to get saddled with Vi as your date?"

"I wouldn't say 'unlucky'," Caitlyn said.

"Burglary," Vi said.

Caitlyn whipped her head around to glare at Vi. "Don't joke about that."

Vi's hand left her waist (she'd kept it there some time, hadn't she?) and she raised it in surrender. "Okay, sure, but it is true, though."

"Wait, you're Caitlyn *Kiramman*?" This was another partygoer, a girl with platinum blonde hair in neat box braids down to her waist. "The girl who got Vi arrested? I *have* to know how you two ended up going out."

Caitlyn could not fully explain the spike of horror that drove into her at this comment. Perhaps it was the uncomfortable realization that Vi had *told* these friends about her, perhaps it was the fact that Vi's open, casual expression shuttered into something uncomfortable. Perhaps Caitlyn was just embarrassed to be known as the person who had ruined Vi's life.

She pulled on her very best 'escaping from a social function' smile, and said, "unfortunately that particular story will have to wait, as I find myself in need of some air." She was a little clipped, and found herself leaving before the woman could actually answer, skirting around Vi to the back door, stepping out onto a small porch that was only occupied by a couple of people smoking.

"Are you alright?" asked one of them, a skinny, lanky man who reminded her a little of Viktor.

"Just fine," she said, although she was clouding up the air with how hard she was breathing. She crossed her arms, trying to hug some warmth back into herself, but the jacket wasn't well-insulated and her dress beneath was sleeveless.

For a few moments, she simply let her breath even out. The sharpness of the air in her lungs was calming, even as it bit at her cheeks, still flushed from her drink. How much vodka was in that, anyway? They said something about 'two shots' but it might have been a joke or an underestimation. Caitlyn had only drunk half of it.

The door opened and closed again, bringing with it a flash of light and a snatch of the din from inside. Caitlyn resolutely looked out at the yard, black trees against a navy sky, bare of moonlight and of anything but unwanted February snow.

"Cait." It was Vi, coming out after her like Caitlyn was actually her date and not just somebody she'd recruited to accompany her to this stupid party so that she would be let in the door.

"Go back inside, Vi. I can find my way home just fine."

"Are you kidding? I'm not, like, *bothered* by what they said. Though, I did have to remind them that *you* didn't get me arrested, *I* got me arrested."

"You really don't blame me for that?"

"No." Something warm and soft settled around her shoulders. Vi was draping a blanket around her, because Caitlyn hadn't bothered getting her coat. She wrapped herself tighter in it, hunching her head so that the fabric folded up around her shoulders and protected her ears from the chill. Vi continued: "I do blame the assholes who decided to punish me as best they could after the fact. Even if I did cuss out the judge."

Caitlyn didn't answer for a long moment.

Vi nudged against her side. "They had you in front of a lineup, cupcake. If you didn't pick me out, somebody innocent would have got the hammer in my place."

"I suppose."

"You said it got bad for you, too, right? So I wasn't the only one with problems. I probably would've been pissed at you when I was fifteen, but I'm not."

Caitlyn didn't like thinking on that time in her life. "It wasn't a big issue, really," she said, although it felt like it had been the end of the world. Curfews, restrictions, her parents going through her laptop and her phone

while she stood by and watched, panicking and wishing she could just turn and run. "They tightened security. Then they realized I was sneaking out at night."

Vi elbowed her again, more of a friendly jostle this time. "Didn't know you were a rebel," she said, and when Caitlyn lifted her head, she found Vi smiling again.

"It wasn't as if I was sneaking out to go spray-paint buildings, I was just..."

"Just what?"

"I had a girlfriend," she said. *"Imagine how this would look, Caitlyn, your mother's up for reelection."* *"Your father is correct. Teenage fooling about is not something we can afford."* "My parents were not pleased."

Vi bit her lower lip, a frown wrinkling her brow. "I'm sorry. I guess I got lucky Vander never really cared about that."

"I imagine they will eventually come around. But most of my mother's constituents are very... traditional."

"You mean they're bigoted old assholes."

Vi really did tell it like it is. "Ha. Yes."

"Cait. Do you want me to walk you home?" Vi's voice was impossibly soft.

"No, no. It's fine. Let's go back in, I truly did just need some air." She unwrapped the blanket-shawl from around her, and Vi took it, folding it over itself in her hands.

"Okay. But tell me if something—I don't want people to be assholes to you."

"They're fine."

The fact that Vi wasn't upset was really all that mattered to her, anyhow.

— — —

Vi had lost Caitlin somehow, even in this very small house. They'd had a few more drinks, Rae had apologized for saying it was Cait's fault Vi got arrested, and Caitlyn had proved she was very good at Blackjack even when fairly drunk. Vi swore she was counting cards.

She'd disappeared while Vi mixed another drink (and then several more for friends and random partygoers, because as soon as people saw Vi pull out an actual cocktail shaker from the kitchen cabinets, they started putting in requests. Being a Real Live Bartender, she was much better than just pouring a rum and coke or putting vodka in whatever flavored soda or juice combination you had lying around. Granted, she wasn't a very *good* bartender, because the Last Drop was not a 'craft cocktails' sort of establishment, but she was better than most college house parties saw.

She made a drink for Caitlyn, too, wanting to prove her skills a little bit. Maybe wanting some attention from Cait, too.

Caitlyn was so, so pretty in a red dress. Her hair was a bit curled at the ends. She had lipstick on, a deep wine color that matched her dress, and it left little kiss marks on her cup. Vi was really wishing she hadn't pushed so hard on the 'you are my last option for this thing' when she asked Caitlyn to this party.

She headed upstairs, to the little secondary living space on the landing by the second floor bedroom. There was a couch there, even saggier than the one downstairs, and as she came up the steps, Vi could see feet—a pair of people, tangled in one another.

One was Caitlyn. Vi recognized her shoes, black heels with bright red soles. The other pair were platform boots with star-shaped charms dangling from the laces. A girl, ostensibly. Vi paused where she stood.

"I've never been," said the girl who was not Caitlyn, sounding dreamy and drunk. "You should take me, sometime."

"Of course, it's lovely," Caitlyn replied, just as soft.

Vi turned around and let them be, laughing and shaking her head. All this time, 'is Caitlyn Kiramman gay?' was a question Vi hadn't even asked, but now that she had the answer, it was something she'd needed to know all along.

God damn, though. She wished she'd noticed earlier. She might have done something about it.

5. If you knew just what a fool you had made me

Summary for the Chapter:

Old antagonists return, Caitlyn and Viktor are the ultimate mlm/wlw friendship.

Notes for the Chapter:

Figured I would go ahead and post this one now too!

It was the night after the Valentine's party and Vi was prepping to open the bar, still back in the kitchen fucking around and checking inventory, because the Saturday night after Valentine's was gonna be dead as hell and whoever did show up was gonna be sad and lonely.

Vi supposed she was also one of those sad and lonely people, so what the hell.

She'd walked Caitlyn home after the party, both of them still a little tipsy, and at one point, Cait had almost slipped on the ice and Vi caught her, and instead of *'my hero,'* or *'oh, it seems I have fallen for you,'* Caitlyn said, "they really need to salt these walkways better."

They did need to salt the walkways better, to be fair.

When Vi swung out of the kitchen and back behind the bar, there was someone sitting at one of the tables across from Powder, leaning over one of her drawings.

"Quite fascinating. And this part catches on fire?"

"Yeah! It has an ignition here—"

"Hey—sir? Bar's not open yet." Vi crossed the room in a few quick steps, her defenses already prickling, because what the *fuck*, old man, that was her baby sister!

When he lifted his head, Vi realized she recognized him.

In the back office of the bar, there was a photo in a frame that was screwed onto the wall. When Vander had repainted at some past date, he'd painted over the edges of the frame, making it damn near impossible to remove, immortalizing the three founders of the Last Drop standing in front of the newly opened bar. Vander, Benzo, and the man who was sitting in front of Vi.

Silco.

She didn't know much about him, just that he'd had some very different ideas on how to run a business compared to Vander and Benzo, and he was the reason Vander had both an assault charge on his record and a scar on his stomach. He also might have been Vander's ex, but she'd never been able to work out the particulars and Vander didn't exactly wanna talk about it, which she respected.

"Ah. You must be the elder sister," Silco said, his voice low, raspy, and downright *slimy*.

"Powder, go upstairs," Vi said.

"But—Mr. Silco wanted to talk to me about my robots—"

"Powder! C'mon. Go."

She stuck her tongue out at Vi on the way.

"Precocious little one, isn't she?" Silco said, turning his head to watch. He had to look over his shoulder, the eyepatch on his left side limiting his field of vision. Vi wanted to knock Silco on his ass. She wanted to yell for Vander. She was afraid Vander would also want to knock Silco on his ass.

"I don't know why you're here," Vi said, "but you should leave. Now. I think you already know you're not welcome in this place." She commended herself for sounding relatively levelheaded.

"My reputation precedes me," he replied grandly. He stood, and Vi wasn't sure if that was a good thing. "I simply wanted to reintroduce myself. Let an

old friend know I'm back in the neighborhood." He reached into his pocket and set a little card on the table. "I suppose I'll see him around."

With that, he turned and left, giving a lackadaisical wave over his shoulder. Vi stood there, stunned, and grabbed for the card.

It was a business card, thick stock, matte black. The text on it was also black (terrible decision) but glossy, so if you held it up to the light, a name became visible. *Shimmer.*

She flipped it over to find a neatly printed address, website, and QR code, all in plain white. Examining it with her phone brought up a page for a new nightclub two blocks over, opening the first week in March.

So the guy comes back to the Lanes, sets up shop two blocks away, and opens up his own bar right next door to Vander? Then drops by? To say what, 'fuck you'?

Vi folded the business card in her hand so that the stupid glossy logo was tucked away, and considered tossing it straight into the trash.

Instead, she stuffed it in her pocket.

She needed to scope this place out.

— — —

Caitlyn knew the library was closing. She didn't *want* to be kicked out. She didn't *want* to give Viktor the hassle of taking the elevator up and walking all the way to her study room, either, but she was caught up re-reading the email from her Creative Writing professor that had been plaguing her all afternoon. *'Your piece would make a great entry for the University literary magazine. Although not your preferred field, a publishing opportunity such as this would be of great benefit to you, Caitlyn. Please see submission guidelines below.'*

It was about the short story she'd written. The girl fighting against the world for the sake of her little sister. *Vi's* story. Which Vi still knew nothing about.

Submitting it would give Caitlyn about three weeks in which to tell Vi, and if she got accepted and Vi was upset, there would be no turning back.

Of course, there was the very good possibility Vi wouldn't even read the University lit mag.

Caitlyn heard familiar footsteps interrupted by the thump of a cane and realized she'd zoned out long enough that Viktor had indeed come up here to retrieve her.

"I'm sorry," she was already saying as he opened the door, snapping her laptop closed and stacking her books to shove them into her backpack. "I didn't realize the time."

"That's unlike you, Caitlyn," Viktor said. "Usually you are just staying around on purpose to irritate me."

"Let me buy you coffee to make up for it?" she offered.

"Buy me dinner. We could both use some, I think. And stop drinking coffee so late at night." This was almost certainly a hypocritical suggestion.

She gave him a little salute and followed him, keeping pace so she didn't pass him even with his slower gait. As she went, she flicked off all the lights, and she paused at the door and checked her cell while Viktor locked up the library. She didn't know why she expected something from Vi—since they'd exchanged numbers prior to the Valentine's party, Vi texted her sometimes, but it was sporadic, usually about her homework. She had already confirmed what she wanted Vi to bring to their next session, so there was no reason for Vi to chat.

Cait didn't 'buy him dinner' so much as she let Viktor check in to the dining hall with her student ID, borrowing one of her meal points. She always had leftovers, anyhow. Viktor made a face in her direction when she came back from the buffet with a cup of coffee in addition to her fettuccine alfredo.

"It is a much smaller coffee than I would have gotten from the cafe," she argued.

He rolled his eyes but he didn't extend the debate.

Viktor picked all the chicken out of his pasta and Caitlyn was reminded of Vi telling her that her younger sister separated out all her food. Viktor was doing this because he was a vegetarian but not a very stringent one, or, at least, the dining hall's limited options did not permit very stringent vegetarianism. "So, what distracted you enough to lose track of the time?" he asked, while he completed this.

"Nothing important, it's just..." she paused, thought about passing it off as simply becoming engrossed in her studies.

But wouldn't Viktor, of all people, understand?

"It's about a girl."

"I am afraid I do not know much about those," Viktor said. He finally finished extracting all the protein out of his meal and pushed the little heap of chicken to the side.

"You know enough, I think, to give me some advice." She took a drink of her coffee. "The girl I'm tutoring, Vi."

"That's your type, eh?"

She wanted to kick him under the table like she would with Jayce, but refrained, because Viktor wasn't nearly as sturdy. "Apparently so. She also happens to be the girl who broke into my parents' home six years ago."

"Oh. So you don't have feelings for her?"

"I *do*, and that's the problem." It was strangely easy to admit that out loud. "I mean, of all the people, right?"

Viktor gave a noncommittal, unhelpful hum which still prompted her to continue, somehow.

"Even if I could say something to her about it, how would I—I mean, I—she should be furious with me, all things considered. Somehow she's not, she's just so... so *good*, even though the world hasn't been good to her. She's bright in a sea of dark. The way she cares about people makes me want to be better to the people I care for."

Viktor set down his fork. "That is... quite serious, Caitlyn. I would say you ought to tell her right away, but I would be a hypocrite, I think."

"Because you haven't told Jayce you've been in love with him since undergrad?"

"You do not need to call me out for it," he griped. "But yes. That is why."

"I can't," she said.

"Why not?" he asked.

A thousand reasons ran through her head. They were too different. Her parents wouldn't approve. She didn't have time for a relationship. She didn't know how to *be* in a relationship anymore. She was still Vi's tutor, and if she was rejected she would have to continue facing all those sessions and remember it every time. She was scared.

She was *scared*.

"Because," she said. "She's actually my friend now, and I'm terrified of what will happen if I admit to having feelings for her and she doesn't feel the same. I just... want to be sure this will go right."

"Caitlyn." Viktor leaned forward, a serious little furrow in the middle of his brow. "If I knew how to admit romantic feelings to a close friend and ensure it went well, I would have been married to Jayce for years now. Me giving you romantic advice is like the blind leading the blind with full knowledge that all around there are cliff's edges. We go nowhere."

Dismal, and true.

"I wish miraculous luck to us both, then," Caitlyn said, raising her coffee mug as if in a toast.

Viktor rolled his eyes.

"You're supposed to say 'cheers' or something."

"Cheers," he said, so deadpan, it ruined the whole thing anyhow.

Author's Note:

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